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National Security Advisor Holds Press Briefing

Press Briefing by National Security Advisor Dr. Condoleezza Rice
The James S. Brady Briefing Room

4:10 P.M. EDT

DR. RICE: Good afternoon. I'm going to give you a chronology of the events that occurred during the spring and summer of 2001. But I want to start with a little definitional work. When we talk about threats, they come in many varieties. Very often we have uncorroborated information; sometimes we have corroborated but very general information. But I can tell you that it is almost never the case that we have information that is specific as to time, place, or method of attack.

In the period starting in December 2000, the intelligence community started reporting increase in traffic concerning terrorist activities. In the April-May time frame, there was specific threat reporting about al Qaeda attacks against U.S. targets or interest that might be in the works.

Now, there was a clear concern that something was up, that something was coming, but it was principally focused overseas. The areas of those concern were the Middle East, the Arabian Peninsula, and Europe.

In the June time frame, arrests for the Millennium plot, there was testimony by the participants in the Millennium plot that Abu Zabda had said that there might be interest in attacking the United States. And this comes out of testimony that was there as a result of the Millennium plot. And then in June -- on June 26th, there was a threat spike, and as a result, again focusing overseas, the State Department issued a worldwide caution. Again, that was June 26th, and you probably remember that caution.

Now, the FAA was also concerned of threats to U.S. citizens such as airline hijackings, and therefore, issued an information circular -- and an information circular goes out the private carriers from law enforcement -- saying that we have a concern. That was a June 22nd information circular.

At the end of June, there was a status of threat and action meeting that the -- what we call the Counterterrorism Security Group -- it is a group that is interagency that meets on the direction of an NSC Special Assistant, Dick Clarke at that time. There was a meeting of that, and Dick Clarke reported to me that steps were being taken by the CSG.

On July 2nd, as a result of some of that work, the FBI released a message saying that there are threats to be worried about overseas, but we cannot -- while we cannot foresee attacks domestically, we cannot rule them out. This is an inlet, and again, an inlet goes out to law enforcement from the FBI.

On July 2nd, the FAA issued another IC, saying that Renshaw -- again associated with the Millennium plot -- said that there was an intention of using explosives in an airport terminal. This was a very specific IC.

On July 5th, the threat reporting had become sufficiently robust, though not, again, very specific, but sufficiently robust, there was a lot of chatter in the system, that in his morning meeting the President asked me to go back and to see what was being done about all of the chatter that was there. Andy Card and I met that afternoon with Dick Clarke, and Dick Clarke informed us that he had already had a meeting of the CSG core group and that he was holding another meeting that afternoon that would be focused on threats, and that would bring the domestic agencies into the CSG.

On July 6th, the CSG core players met again because there was concern about -- very high concern about

potential attacks in Paris, Turkey, Rome, and they acted to go so far as to suspend non-essential travel of U.S. counterterrorism staff. So this is a period in which, again, attacks -- potential attacks overseas were heightened enough that there was almost daily meeting now, sometimes twice a day, of either the CSG or its subgroups. Contingency planning was done on how to deal with multiple, simultaneous attacks around the world.

The period in mid-July was a point of another major threat spike, and it all related to the G-8 summit that was coming up. And in fact, there was specific threat information about the President. There was a lot of work done with liaison services abroad; in fact, the CIA went on what I think you would call a full-court press to try and deal with these potential attacks, and indeed, managed through these intelligence activities and liaison activities to disrupt attacks in Paris, Turkey and Rome.

On July 18th, the FAA issued another IC, saying that there were ongoing terrorist threats overseas, and that although there were no specific threats directed at civil aviation, they told the airlines, "we urge you to use the highest level of caution."

On July 18th also, the FBI issued another inlet on the Millennium plot conviction, reiterating its July 2nd message saying we're concerned about threats as a result of the Millennium plot conviction.

At the end of July, the FAA issued another IC, which said, there's no specific target, no credible info of attack to U.S. civil aviation interests, but terror groups are known to be planning and training for hijackings, and we ask you, therefore, to urge -- to use caution.

Throughout July and August, several times a week, there were meetings of the CSG, reviewing information at hand. There was no specific new information that came in in that period of time after the end of July and sort of in August, leading up to September. But the agencies were still at a heightened state of alert. Particularly overseas. I think the military actually had dropped its state of alert, but everybody was still on a heightened state of alert.

On August 1st, the FBI issued another inlet on the upcoming third East Africa bombing anniversary, and again reiterated the message that had been in the July 2nd inlet.

Now, on August 6th, the President received a presidential daily briefing which was not a warning briefing, but an analytic report. This analytic report, which did not have warning information in it of the kind that said, they are talking about an attack against so forth or so on, it was an analytic report that talked about UBL's methods of operation, talked about what he had done historically, in 1997, in 1998. It mentioned hijacking, but hijacking in the traditional sense, and in a sense, said that the most important and most likely thing was that they would take over an airliner, holding passengers and demand the release of one of their operatives. And the blind sheikh was mentioned by name as -- even though he's not an operative of al Qaeda, but as somebody who might be bargained in this way.

I want to reiterate, it was not a warning. There was no specific time, place or method mentioned. What you have seen in the run-up that I've talked about is that the FAA was reacting to the same kind of generalized information about a potential hijacking as a method that al Qaeda might employ, but no specific information saying that they were planning such an attack at a particular time.

There is one other FAA IC in this period, issued on August 16th, where the FAA issued an IC on disguised weapons. They were concerned about some reports that the terrorists had made breakthroughs in cell phones, key chains and pens as weapons.

There are a number of other ICs that were also issued; we don't think they were germane to this, but I'm sure you can get the full record of all of the ICs that were released from Transportation.

I want to reiterate that during this time, the overwhelming bulk of the evidence was that this was an attack that was likely to take place overseas. The State Department, the Defense Department were on very high states of alert. The embassies were -- have very clear protocols on how to button up; so does the military. That was done. But at home, while there was much less reporting or chatter at home, people were thinking about the U.S. and the FBI was involved in a number of investigations of potential al Qaeda personnel operating in the United States.

And that's my opening, and I'll take questions. Ron.

Q Why didn't the American public know about these facts before they got on planes in the summer and fall of last year?

DR. RICE: It is always, as you've learned since September 11th, a question of how good the information is and whether or not putting the information out is a responsible thing to do. I've emphasized that this was the most generalized kind of information. There was no time, there was no place, there was no method of attack. It simply said, these are people who train and seem to talk possibly about hijackings -- that you would have risked shutting down the American civil aviation system with such generalized information. I think you would have had to think five, six, seven times about that very, very hard.

Steps were taken, and I'm sure security steps were taken. But you have to realize that when you're dealing with something this general, there's a limit to the amount that you can do.

Q What security steps --

DR. RICE: Again, the FAA asked security personnel, ground personnel to have a heightened state of alert because there were tensions in the Middle East --

Q -- in any security --

DR. RICE: There were tensions in the Middle East that were leading to terrorists who had sympathies with those Middle East events. There were various trials going on, and it was the association with all that was going on that said, look, these are people who talk from time to time about -- and train for hijacking; you should take a look at your security procedures and try to respond. But this was very generalized information.

Q Specifically, after this August 6th analytic report briefing that the President had, what did he do? What did other people in the administration do? What did he make of it? What action was taken? And why didn't he ever tell the American people about it?

DR. RICE: Well, the action was being taken, because, if you notice, what is briefed to him in kind of a summary way -- and I should say, he had said to his briefer, I'd like you from time to time to give me summaries of what you know about potential attacks. And this was an analytic piece that tried to bring together several threads -- in 1997, they talked about this; in 1998, they talked about that; it's been known that maybe they want to try and release the blind Sheikh -- I mean, that was the character of it. And so the actions were being taken in response to the generalized information that was being reported here, too. And the President was aware that there were ongoing efforts that were being taken.

Q -- any specific information just prior to August 6th that raised concerns about hijacking of U.S. planes?

DR. RICE: Again, this was generalized information that put together the fact that there were terrorist groups who were unhappy about things that were going on in the Middle East, as well as al Qaeda operatives, which we'd been watching for a long time -- that there was more chatter than usual, and that we knew that they were people who might try a hijacking. But, you know, again, that terrorism and hijacking might be associated is not rocket science.

Q Why shouldn't this be seen as an intelligence failure, that you were unable to predict something happening here?

DR. RICE: Steve, I don't think anybody could have predicted that these people would take an airplane and slam it into the World Trade Center, take another one and slam it into the Pentagon; that they would try to use an airplane as a missile, a hijacked airplane as a missile. All of this reporting about hijacking was about traditional hijacking. You take a plane -- people were worried they might blow one up, but they were mostly worried that they might try to take a plane and use it for release of the blind Sheikh or some of their own people.

But I think that there's always a fine balance, but even in retrospect, even in hindsight, there was nothing in what

was briefed to the President that would suggest that you would go out and say to the American people, look, I just read that terrorists might hijack an aircraft. They talk about hijacking an aircraft once in a while, but have no specifics about when, where, under what circumstances.

David.

Q Condi, this analytic report that the President received sounds like it wasn't his ordinary morning brief. Was it something that he had requested because of the various elements that had come up? Was it something you had requested? And just to follow up on Terry's point here, was the hijacking mentioned here based on any new intelligence that had been developed between these meetings that you mentioned in the July 5th-6th time frame, or was it simply -- did it come out of the Philippines experience?

DR. RICE: It was actually summarizing the kind of intelligence that they'd been acting on. I think it's a little strong to actually call it intelligence -- the interpretation that was there that these were people who might try hijacking.

It was -- very often as a part of his normal brief, David, he will get things that have been prepared for him because he's asked for a specific kind of document. And as I said, he frequently says, you know, I'd like to see everything you know about X; or I'd like you to summarize -- because, as you can imagine, you get intelligence in little snippets, it's helpful from time to time to put it together.

Q And did this also include then the unified FBI findings? Of course, the Phoenix memo had been through the FBI in July -- did it include concerns about Moussaoui? And how much did this bring in the other agencies?

DR. RICE: This did not include the issues that you just talked about, it did not.

Q Was that a failure to your mind? Should it have?

DR. RICE: Look, let me just speak to the Moussaoui and the so-called Phoenix memorandum. As you might imagine, a lot of things are prepared within agencies; they're distributed internally, they're worked internally. It's unusual that anything like that would get to the President. He doesn't recall seeing anything, I don't recall seeing anything of this kind.

Q On Phoenix or on Moussaoui --

DR. RICE: On either. Prior to September 11th. But I've asked George Tenet and I've asked Bob Mueller and I've asked my own people to spend some time really going in depth and seeing whether or not it was possible that it got to the President.

Q Condi, officials who are familiar with the President's briefing have suggested that the information about hijackings was so vague and so general that you could read it from the podium without any danger to sources and methods. Could you read us those couple of lines about hijackings?

DR. RICE: I'm not going to read you the couple of lines, but I will tell you, Jim, that it was very vague. The one piece that had any texture at all was that it might be for the purpose of freeing an operative like the blind Sheikh.

But again, most of what people were acting on was these were terrorist groups who were dissatisfied. We had reasons to believe that there was more chatter, more talk of attacks. Hijackings seemed one possibility. They train and seemed to be interested in that, but nothing more specific than that.

Q I've been led to believe that hijacking was actually a minor part of that briefing. You're suggesting it was an analytical look at all of the kinds of things that al Qaeda was considering and working on?

DR. RICE: I would say that most of it was actually historical. It was not a catalogue of, they might use this, they might use this, they might use this, they might use that. That was not the character. But it was mostly historical, going back to things that happened in '97, things that happened in '98, kind of methods of operation in the embassy bombings, might they return to some of those methods. It was that kind of thing.

Q So, two questions. No discussion at all then in this analytical briefing about either the information during the investigation in the Philippines about possibly flying a plane into the CIA building, or the investigation overseas about possibly flying a plane into the Eiffel Tower? No analytical information discussing those options at all?

And, B, you know that you would not be here today if it weren't eight months after the attack we hear for the first time that, even in a general sense, the word "hijacking" and "al Qaeda" was before the President prior to September 11th. Why is it that in all the questioning of administration officials -- the President, the Vice President, yourself and others, did you have any hint, did you have any clue, that nobody simply said, you know, we didn't; there was this general talk once of hijacking, but we looked into it, it had nothing to do with this, there was no connection?

DR. RICE: John, this all came out as a result of our preparations to help the committees on the Hill that are getting ready to review the events. It wasn't -- frankly, it didn't pop to the front of people's minds, because it's one report among very, very many that you get.

And so it's out of that review that it became clear that this was there. I will say that, again, hijacking before 9/11 and hijacking after 9/11 do mean two very, very different things. And so focusing on it before 9/11 -- perhaps it's clear that after 9/11 you would have looked at this differently, but certainly not before 9/11.

Q And no discussion in this briefing, or any others, about the possibility of al Qaeda hijacking, and the fact that there have been active investigations into the possibility of a CIA building plot, or an Eiffel Tower plot. Never came up?

DR. RICE: It did not come up.

Q Was that an intelligence failure, that nobody said, you know, there has been talk about doing this elsewhere?

DR. RICE: We knew that there were -- that there were discussions of hijacking. We knew that there were -- that they had thought about hijackings in a number of places. But, again, the information that was there in the PDB, which is the reference point here, was not about those activities.

Q When did the White House hear about the Phoenix memorandum? You said it was before -- not before September 11th. When did you finally hear about the Phoenix memorandum?

DR. RICE: No, what I said -- let me be very clear, because we're going to be certain of our facts here. And as you might imagine, it takes a little time to make sure of the facts. Neither the President, nor I have recollection of ever hearing about the Phoenix memo in the time prior to September 11th. We've asked FBI, CIA, our own people, to go back and see whether or not it's possible that it somehow came to him. I personally became aware of it just recently.

Q And the second question, Dr. Rice. Many members of Congress, of both parties, are expressing some anger or saying they weren't informed about these briefings, or intelligence readings, or whatever was being held in the White House in August and September. Was that a valid point in July and August?

DR. RICE: Well, the general threat information of the kind that I've been talking about -- heightened sense of alert, concerns that al Qaeda might be plotting something, particularly, overseas -- it is my understanding that on a regular basis, the intelligence committees were told about the concerns of the intelligence agencies about these kinds of activities.

Again, this is principally -- these were all principally pretty general, with the exception I think of the overseas threat that had to do with the G-8, which was more specific than anything else that we had.

Q Dr. Rice, can you tell us whether you had conversations with Mr. Clarke expressly about what the potential impact on American commercial aviation would be in the event of a hijacking and the taking of hostages? You said earlier that the impact could have been extraordinary. Could you elaborate? And what did you and Mr. Clarke discuss as to --

DR. RICE: I'm sorry, that it could have been extraordinary?

Q That you'd considered issuing a warning.

DR. RICE: No, I didn't say that. I said, you always have to consider whether or not from some incredibly general information you want to try and issue a warning, because this was very, very general information. I don't think we ever thought a warning made sense in this context. It was not like post 9/11, when even then people have said, well, you issued a really general warning, what are people supposed to do?

In the pre 9/11 period, we really never even considered issuing a warning. I was saying that if it had been considered, you would have had to consider very carefully what kind of impact you would have. But it was actually never considered. What was done was to get the FAA in the room so that they could do the things that they thought appropriate under these circumstances.

Q Did you meet directly with --

DR. RICE: I did not.

Q Going back to the August 6th briefing that he had, that's the very first time that the President hears both the term hijacking and UBL together. Did he respond at all? And secondly, were those two linked in any way in briefings that he got after that, until September 11th?

DR. RICE: Well, there are a couple of other times that hijacking and terrorism are mentioned in this --

Q How many?

DR. RICE: I think a couple. I mean, it's not -- it doesn't feature prominently in the reporting, because again, it was not based on information that they were planning a particular hijacking at a particular point in time. Certainly nothing like we were looking at that there might be attacks against the G-8 leadership, there might be attacks against the President. It might be in Rome. A lot of chatter around Rome. Nothing like that. This was an analytic piece about methods that they had available to them.

Q As a follow-up to that, between August 6th and September 11th, this was somehow kept on the President's plate, in front of the President a bit. Was it kept on your plate, as well?

DR. RICE: Certainly what was -- first of all, kept on the plate of the agencies was that a number of these ICs were still in force. So there was a continued alert level. As I've said, the one place where I think we've determined that there was a lowering of alert level was the military came down kind of one-half level. As you know, it's very hard for them to stay on extremely high alert.

We continued to monitor and follow this. There are threat conferences, threat warning conferences, meetings of the CSG, civets, as we call them, by teleconference several times a week. And that continued in this period. But there was no new information that suggested something more was afoot.

Q Dr. Rice, there are a lot of widows and widowers and family members of the victims of September 11th who are listening to this, and thinking today that the government let them down, that there were intelligence failures. As the person who is supposed to connect the dots with the NSC for the President, what would you like to say to them today?

DR. RICE: This government did everything that it could in a period in which the information was very generalized, in which there was nothing specific to which to react. And had this President known of something more specific, or known that a plane was going to be used as a missile, he would have acted on it. But the fact is, this, in retrospect even, looks hard to put together. At the time, we were looking at something very different. To the degree that hijacking was an issue, it was traditional hijacking.

The threats -- al Qaeda -- you know, you did have the FBI actively pursuing leads and trying to run this down. You did get the disruption of attacks in Rome and Paris and in Turkey. But this President, who takes extremely

seriously the security of the United States, was doing everything that he could in this period, as were the rest of the public servants in this government.

Q Dr. Rice, I'd like to know a little bit more about the August 6th meeting. It was at the ranch. Were you there? And was the analytic report the only subject discussed in the briefing? Was it an oral presentation, was it a document? How lengthy was the document? Was there only one mention of hijacking in that document?

DR. RICE: It is a document, Judy. There were other things briefed that day. I don't actually know what they were. The President's daily briefing is usually several briefings on various subjects. I was here in Washington, not in Crawford, but I did talk with the -- I always talk to the President immediately after his briefings.

The President and I talked all the time during this period of time about al Qaeda. He was particularly concerned not just about threats to -- that they might be threatening us, but how we went after them. And so there was a lot of work going on in this entire period also to try and put together a strategy to bring them down.

Q How long was the document, and was there, in fact, only one sentence that mentioned hijacking?

DR. RICE: The word, "hijacking" is mentioned once in the specific way that I've talked about and one other time kind of in summary. It's a page and a half document.

Q You said that all of this came out as you prepared documents for upcoming committee hearings. Was this a document that you had intended would get out in the public forum of committee hearings, or had you asked them to keep it classified?

DR. RICE: We had not made any determination as to what documents were going forward, the nature of that. We're working with the committee right now to try to make sure that they have access to the information. I mean, after all, it is important that the full story get out there. The American people deserve that; the administration wants that. And we are working with the committee on these documents.

Q Had this document actually gone to Capitol Hill?

DR. RICE: I don't know the answer to that, John. I don't think so -- no, this document had not.

Q Dr. Rice, when the information was passed on from the FAA to the airline carriers, did any of that information include specifically a reference to al Qaeda or Osama bin Laden? Because terrorists are terrorists, but this group obviously was viewed even by the government as a more serious threat. Did those warnings -- were they specific enough to say, not just worry about hijacks, or worry about terrorist hijacking, but did they say bin Laden?

DR. RICE: We were worried about al Qaeda, and al Qaeda was clearly at the top of the heap. But there were other terrorist organizations that we were also worried about in this period of time. The EIJ, for instance, because it was -- the blind Sheikh's organization was that organization. So I think that what you saw was that the concern about terrorism, or about terrorists, was actually broader than just al Qaeda. Al Qaeda was one of organization that might use this particular method. So it said "terrorist."

Q Dr. Rice, forgive me, this page and a half document on August 6th, I know you say it was non-specific, and I know you say it's a compendium and an analytical report -- how can you say it wasn't a warning? Are you not telling the President that there's danger ahead?

DR. RICE: No. A warning -- there was nothing that said this is going to happen, or this might happen. It said, this is a method that these people might be considering. That was the nature of this. And it was very non-specific. In the sense that -- you know, if -- going again, comparing it to what we were seeing, for instance, on the G-8, this was an analytic piece that looked at methods that they might use.

Everybody knew that terrorists and hijacking have been associated -- for time immemorial. And how many hijackings have there been by terrorists? In that sense, there was nothing really new here. And in fact, since it was mentioned a couple of other times that there might be hijackings -- again, non-specific -- I think it would be very hard to characterize this as a warning.

Q Dr. Rice, are you aware of the reports at the time that -- was in Washington on September 11th, and on September 10th, \$100,000 was wired to Pakistan to this group here in this area? While he was here meeting with you or anybody in the administration?

DR. RICE: I have not seen that report, and he was certainly not meeting with me.

Q Dr. Rice, on the issue of connecting the dots, you talked about a number of things here -- the possibility of a CIA building, the Eiffel Tower, Moussaoui, Phoenix, all those other dots that are out there. Where do you think those dots should have come together? Should the briefer who prepared the document for the President have known about all those things? Is there a place where this should have come together?

DR. RICE: Well, I think that one of the important questions is how we go forward, organizationally, to deal with some scenes. And I thought Director Mueller's testimony yesterday to this effect, that called for reorganization that would cause great fusion of intelligence from different sources, and particularly from domestic and foreign sources, is probably right.

But let me just say, we've already begun to make some of those changes. There is an Office of Homeland Security. And I think that's an important change. Secondly, every day now, in the morning, the President sits with the Vice President, with Andy Card, with me, with George Tenet, with Bob Mueller, and with Tom Ridge -- and often with John Ashcroft -- and there's a kind of fusion going on at the top. And the challenge is going to be to build down into the system that same kind of bringing together of information. And I think that's what Bob Mueller and George Tenet and others are looking at. And it's one reason that we have every reason to want to look at -- fully at what happened.

Q On the G-8 plot -- could you just say something more about the G-8 plot? Wasn't that an airplane filled with explosives? Wasn't that plane --

DR. RICE: There were many different potential methods described concerning the G-8. Many. The most troubling was not a specific method with a specific place, but specific targets, like the President.

Q -- want to ask about, was there any link to bin Laden in those threats? And how serious did you take them? How specific were they?

DR. RICE: We took the threats very seriously, because they were somewhat more specific. Again, when I say more specific, it didn't say, on July this date, at this place, at this time, so- and-so will happen. But there was greater texture, there was certainly more information. It's one reason that George Tenet went out of his way to, I would say, tell the agency to go to the ramparts out in the field, to really stir up our liaison services. And I think it was successful, because there were several disruptions.

Campbell, you have got the last question.

Q I just want to go back to the issue of hijacking. You said the FAA in July did issue a kind of warning or an alert of sorts to the

airlines, saying that terror groups were planning or training for hijacking, did you not -- at the end of July? You were taking us through the time line. I just want to be clear that, isn't it unusual that you would make the decision to bring the FAA into this? That there was enough concern that hijackings would be a problem that you would say, you need to let the airlines know and --

DR. RICE: The FAA was one of only -- only one of the domestic agencies brought in. Customs was brought in; INS was brought in. So this was an effort to bring in domestic agencies that might have potential vulnerabilities. But, again, let me read it, because it's extremely important, because, again, they were acting on general information, and therefore, the IC is very general.

And it says, "The target is not clear" -- this is July 31 -- "The target is not clear. The FAA has no credible info to attack U.S. civil aviation interests. Nevertheless, some of the current active groups are known to plan and train for hijackings. FAA encourages all U.S. carriers to exercise prudence and demonstrate a high degree of alertness."

So, again, the operative words here, that "some of the current active groups are known to plan and train for," not, they're planning a particular hijacking.

Q But you went through a list of these. I mean, is it possible -- how do you get the airlines to pay attention to them, if you're putting them out periodically, and if it is something general like this, what do you really expect them to do?

DR. RICE: Well, the problem, as I was explaining when somebody asked me, why didn't we go public with some of these alerts -- or some of this information -- is that when you're dealing with very general information, all you can do is tell people it's very general. And I -- you would have to refer to the Transportation Department and the FAA to get a better sense for what protocols are followed, or how this is all done. But the FAA issued these ICs that, again, were based on very general information and were intended just to alert people that these were organizations that were angry, there was a lot of threat reporting about them, and hijacking was considered to be one of their methods. And that was the extent of it.

Q What was the date of that IC you just read?

DR. RICE: 31 July.

Thank you.

END 4:47 P.M. EDT

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